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TAGS: [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [KWMN](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: I LEFT MY HEART IN FREEDOM AND CAME HOME

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana C. Gfoeller for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: There is no subject dearer to the hearts of even moderately well-off Hejazis (inhabitants of the Western Province) than leaving Saudi Arabia. The most stilted gathering can be brightened up at once by steering the conversation to a fondly anticipated (or remembered) stint outside the Kingdom. The issue boils down to this: if the oppressive Wahhabi lifestyle annoys Hejazis as much as everyone else, why don't they change it? Most claim fear of amorphous "masses" who would overthrow the monarchy if it were being seen as Westernizing. Yet the Hejazis voicing these fears admit to never having discussed this with anyone from the "masses." Could it be that only the Wahhabi religious establishment in the Western Province actually supports such a lifestyle? It appears that no one dares to find out. END SUMMARY.

PLAY SPIN THE GLOBE AND PICK YOUR HEART'S HOMELAND

¶2. (S) Over the course of the past few years in the Western Province (the Hejaz) of Saudi Arabia, Consulate General Jeddah staff has met a surprising number of Hajazis who bear an interesting secret. (Note: Jeddah is the capital of the Hejaz. End note). Outwardly, they seem perfectly normal. If they are men, they wear the uniform white "thobe" and white or red-checkered "gutrah" just like everyone else. If they are women, they come swathed to a more or even more degree in their black "abayas," headscarves, "hijabs," etc. But pick a slight acquaintance with them -) sometimes embarrassingly slight -* and they will reveal that they are not at all what they seem.

¶3. (S) One man (interestingly, the majority of these daydreamers are men) mentioned casually that at heart he was a Spaniard, "somewhere from Andalucia." Another vouchsafed that Paris was his true home. A third shared that he never felt as well as in England, "Saudi Arabia's historic twin,") a surprise, possibly, to the British. A very prosperous Jeddawi businessman by the name of Islam waxed eloquent about how he had never known where his true home was until at a mature age he went with his wife on safari. "All of that greenery, the water, the humidity, the vast plain.... I felt I was in the true Hejaz, in my true home, in the Hejaz the way it ought to be." (Note: while Jeddah is certainly humid and near the water and the Hejaz is vast, one cannot claim that it is green. End Note). Like the men, the women tend to identify with foreign Western countries as opposed to Arab or Islamic-majority ones. One brunette originally from steaming Najran, for example, confided that she never feels more at home than in Canada. For both sexes, however, the United States is the most likely "real homeland."

SOCIAL GRACES

14. (S) Social interaction with relative strangers -- even in the Hejaz, the most cosmopolitan and liberal part of Saudi Arabia -- can be heavy going. Many subjects are taboo except for with the closest of friends: religion, relationships, Saudi politics, human rights, anti-Semitism, the rights of members of other religions besides Islam, the treatment of Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia, women driving, and the list goes on. Others will elicit such predictable responses that they may seem pointless, for example: the Arab-Israeli conflict, the supremacy of Islam over all other religions, the "fact" that the entire Arabian peninsula is the "Vatican" of Islam (and therefore other faiths are forbidden to practice here), etc. The safe topics would appear to be limited to: where (in the West) did you go to school? And where (in the West) do your children go to school? This usually elicits fulsome and lengthy explanations but can grow tedious as the list of schools and experiences is not unlimited.

15. (S) However, there is a topic absolutely guaranteed to fill the most recalcitrant conversational lull: leaving Saudi Arabia. Once having exhausted the topics of education and children (or skipping them altogether) one can bring up the concept of life outside the Kingdom. It does not matter if the trip to be discussed is a vacation or for business, it suffices that it be abroad. Smiles then light up faces. Voices vibrate more. Even the posture straightens. Men and women begin to talk enthusiastically of the trip they just took, the trip they are looking forward to taking, or their favorite trip of all time about which they are happy to reminisce. Unbelievable detail is provided regarding airlines, car rentals, hotels, sights to see, rates, etc. as if disgorged from a photographic memory. The slightest incident is recalled with pleasure. Intricate timetables are shared of when the future trip will be able to take place, often to the day and even the hour of the anticipated departure.

16. (S) The down side of this, inevitably, is a discussion of the return to Saudi Arabia. But while painful to see the accompanying sadness, still the interlocutor remains intensely alive as he or she shares feelings which might otherwise be hidden. The predominant sentiment was best summed up by Islam in a conversation with a ConGenoff as he described the end of yet another trip to South Africa: "I left my heart in freedom and came home."

IMPENDING DOOM?

17. (S) That is indeed the predominant sentiment of the Hejazi returnee: impending doom as individual freedom (what in the West is considered "normal life") is to be surrendered to the stifling strictures of Wahhabi Islam. It is not the feeling, familiar to all, of loss at the end of a vacation. Jeddawi businessmen coming back from grueling negotiations overseas describe the same angst. Neither is it the regret of losing a luxurious lifestyle one can only afford for a few weeks a year. Many (though certainly not all) of these people own palatial homes to rival any luxury hotel, eat five-star restaurant food at home, have staffs to rival any resort, and can purchase the same multi-carat jewelry in Jeddah as they could splurge on abroad. But no amount of money or status can buy them freedom.

UPRISING OF THE "MASSES?"

18. (S) In these circumstances, the question poses itself: if the oppressive Wahhabi lifestyle annoys Hejazis as much as everyone else, why don't they change it? After an extremely well-spoken government official had waxed eloquent about how happy he had been traveling through the United States South recently and how he had dreaded coming back home, a ConGenoff hinted at just this query. Reciting the answer she had heard many times before, the official said that while a prosperous, Western-educated minority pined for Western-style freedoms in the Hejaz, the religion-drenched, uneducated "masses" would rise up as one were even the slightest lifestyle strictures now in place be relaxed.

¶9. (S) "This could spell revolution," cried the official, warming to his subject. "This could be the overthrow of the monarchy. We could see Osama Bin Laden as a theocratic-style dictator and all of the modernizing that we have so painstakingly brought about since the reign of King Abdul Aziz blasted back into the Middle Ages." The official (as many other interlocutors before him who have tackled this subject) went on to say that he and his entire family (including the womenfolk) were willing to sacrifice their freedoms here in order to secure the peace (and their privileged positions, no doubt). Concluded he: "If there weren't the possibility of escape, maybe we would be forced to do something but since we can periodically leave, we don't have to. That'shat trips to the West are for."

¶10. (S) When the ConGenoff asked in turn how he was so sure of what the "masses" really wanted, the government official had only the vaguest of answers. Asked whether he had ever even discussed the subject with any Hejazi who was not prosperous and Western-educated, he admitted that he had not. (Neither has anyone else to Post's Knowledge who follows this line of reasoning. Asked why, some say to do so would be too "dangerous," while others, more candidly perhaps, admit that they do not know any such Hejazis. The only poor, uneducated people they come into contact with are their invariably expatriate servants.)

COMMENT

¶11. (S) There is little doubt that the Hejaz's English-speaking, foreign-educated, globe-trotting elite is out of touch with the average, lower-class and even middle-class Saudi. Certainly, even the Westernized elites of the Nejd (the center of the country) and the Eastern Province are much more conservative and more supportive of pan-Saudi social strictures than is the Hejazi elite. There is also no doubt that the Hejaz's Wahhabi religious establishment is as conservative as in the rest of the Kingdom. Listening to Consular District mosque sermons, as Post does on a continual basis, vouches for that.

¶12. (S) Yet Post reporting also reflects that at least among young Hejazis (working or unemployed, poor or middle-class, men or women) the greatest frustration is over never having even been asked what kind of country they really want. And if they were to be asked, the answer of many of them here in the Hejaz would be a less restrictive form of Islamic monarchy. Could it be that only the imams and the muttawa in the Western Province actually support the oppressive lifestyle now prevailing? Maybe not, but it appears that no Hejazi dares to find out.
GFOELLER